

Discuss the view that
the civil service has
too much influence
over policy



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The Civil service is the administrative branch of the UK government, set with dealing with the everyday running of the country, rather than a ministerial role, which focus on only some areas. It is they that carry out the more mundane roles, although some Civil Servants do have more exciting life styles with jobs such as testing weaponry that is to be bought by the Ministry of Defence.

The Civil Service is to advise ministers on the decisions that need to be made, to brief ministers on the issues involved and to present options to make the minister's decision making easier. At no stage though should Civil Servants be responsible for decision making. There is a clear dividing line between the decision-making role of the minister and the supporting role of the Civil Servant. as Margaret Thatcher put it 'Civil Servants advise; ministers decide'.

Servants are not elected and because of this they should not have the power to make decisions. Decision making is the responsibility of the politicians and it is they who should take responsibility for the success or failures of departmental policy and they should not be held accountable for their advice or for departmental policy. In the case of policy errors or mistakes in implementation it is the minister who has to resign, not the Civil Servant - the Civil Servant should not be held responsible because they have no role in decision making.

This can be seen through the resignation In April 2004 of Beverly Hughes. She forced to resign as minister for Immigration, Citizenship and CounterTerrorism when it was shown that she had been informed of

procedural improprieties concerning the granting of visas to certain categories of workers from Eastern Europe. While this cannot wholly be seen as their fault, it was they, not the civil servants that advised them that had to resign over the events, due to the fact that they are responsible for the final decision.

Ministers have a large workload and have limited time as is shown by the fact that the Core hours in the House of Commons are until 10pm on some evenings, and parliamentary debates sometimes continue into the night, with Ministers having added Committees to sit on and other government business to attend to, as a result, they rely heavily on their Civil Service advice and this puts the Civil Servants into a privileged and influential position. Any advisor should have some influence, if they don't there is not much point in them being there.

However, if ministers lack the time to check Civil Servants' advice, the danger is that they will become a mouthpiece for Civil Service policies. Civil Servants also have the opportunity to 'control' the minister by restricting the supply of information to him or by presenting it in such a way as to limit his options, as was shown by the limited information given to Beverly Hughes. It would be wrong to suggest that this happens often, it remains true that the Civil Service has considerable power. This is deemed as the Minister having gone native and in October 2010, claims were made that Jeremy Hunt had "gone native".

Also, when Alan Johnson took position of the Home Secretary, he had relatively little experience in the policy of governing the UK and was

therefore more reliant on the Civil Service than he may have chosen to be. Manipulation of information may occur. Ministers, such as Alan Johnson, rely on officials to supply them with background facts upon which to base decisions. Skilful officials may be able to present statistics and research findings in a way as to influence final conclusions There is evidence to suggest that the civil service has been politicised due to the increase of special advisers with too much power.

It can be argued that Special Advisers can work effectively with civil servants, and it is a relationship of mutual benefit, not a matter of regret. The role of the UK Civil Service is to help the Government of the day develop and carry out their policies and administer the public services for which they are responsible. Ministers have to be able to trust civil servants to be discreet otherwise politicians may feel the need to surround themselves with political appointees whose main virtue is their loyalty to that politician rather than having ability to formulate good policy and then have it implemented.

A special advisor can give more biased opinions and can be there to help the Minister, rather than the department, policy or government. Spin doctors such as Alistair Campbell had great influence over policy on the basis of how it would appear to the public, and this can be seen in particular over the time Blair spent talking to him, rather than to the Civil Service over plans for the Millennium. There is also evidence to suggest that individual departments to develop long term policies of their own.

When a new minister of government comes to power, the department will seek to impose its own 'culture' upon them. The Treasury is most often

suspected of such tactics, as it is notoriously opposed to increased public expenditure or any radical spending plans, caused by the fact that it has to keep the long term in mind, and the fact that a likely change in government will see most of the policies undone anyway, causing undue harm on the economy.

If the senior Treasury officials can persuade each new Chancellor of the Exchequer of the virtues of keeping spending low, their influence automatically grows. An example of this was in 1999, when Chancellor Gordon Brown was resisting calls for extensive increases in spending on health and education, some critics suggested he had 'gone native', suggesting that Brown had been influenced by the Civil Servants, adopting their norm of behaviour and so losing his enthusiasm for spending.

Overall, the Civil Service do have more power over policy than their supposed political neutrality should let them, but it is to be expected in the modern world of political advisors, and the competitive world which seeks public recognition. While the senior civil servants, due to the permanence and long serving nature do have a great deal of power, the average civil servant has less power, and is more reliant upon presentation of the facts in a favourable way than anything else, something which is true with Ministers and Government as a whole.